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Secret Report Sees Taiwan Near A-Bomb

Taiwan could build a small number of nuclear bombs within six months, according to a recent top-secret Defense Intelligence Agency report.

But U.S. analysts say they doubt that the Taiwanese will choose to do so, for fear of unfavorable American reaction and military retaliation. China might be provoked into attacking Taiwan.

The Taiwanese military nuclear capability is the result of an intensive seven-year development program that would not have been possible without American technology, training and support, at least in the initial phases. It was begun in 1974, when the United States withdrew the nuclear weapons it had deployed secretly on Taiwan.

Until then, the Taiwanese had seen no need for a nuclear deterrent of their own. But on March 14, 1974, Henry A. Kissinger signed National Security Decision Memorandum 248, which is still classified top secret. It said that President Nixon "directs the following changes in deployments and status of U.S. forces based on Taiwan: ... Withdraw our

nuclear weapons during the last half of (19)74 Place Taiwan Air Base on a caretaker basis, upon removal of nuclear weapons"

Late that same year, the Taiwanese nuclear weapons program began at the Chung San Institute of Science and Technology with the approval of Chiang Ching-kuo, who became president early in 1975 after the death of his father, Chiang Kai-shek. U.S. intelligence agencies kept close watch on the progress of the Taiwanese scientists, according to secret CIA and Pentagon documents seen by my associate Dale Van Atta.

The major facility was the Taiwan Research Reactor, which "produces about 10 kilograms of 'weapon grade' plutonium per year" under average conditions, the CIA reported, adding, "The reactor was obtained from Canada along with fuel for more than two full core loadings."

Another report pointed out that the Taiwanese have accumulated an unknown amount of radioactive material, including at least 160 tons of uranium from South Africa purchased in 1977. And in 1980 Taiwan signed a six-year contract with South Africa for at least 3,500 tons of uranium.

Lacking proper missiles, the Taiwanese could deliver nuclear devices "only by surface means or by a large transport aircraft such as a C130," according to one intelligence report.

Such primitive delivery systems would be daunting enough. But

there are even more compelling reasons why U.S. experts say they think it's unlikely, but not impossible, that the Taiwanese will turn their capability into construction of nuclear weapons at this time. A Pentagon analysis explains:

"Despite public and private assurances that it does not intend to build nuclear weapons, many officials at high levels on Taiwan continue to believe that a nuclear capability will provide the ROC [Taiwan] with an independent deterrent in the event security arrangements with the U.S. are unsatisfactory.

"However, we believe that Taiwan will stop short of actually developing nuclear weapons for two reasons. First, given the U.S. position on nuclear proliferation, Taipei realizes that we would react sharply if Taiwan developed a nuclear weapon. In this regard, we believe that the ROC will continue to place greater value on continued ties (albeit less formal ones) with the U.S., particularly continued U.S. support to nuclear power programs on Taiwan, than on acquiring a token nuclear capability.

"A second factor influencing Taiwan's acquisition of nuclear weapons involves the possibility of a strong PRC [Peoples' Republic of China] reaction. In this regard, the ROC is likely to believe that any movement toward the actual deployment of nuclear weapons by the ROC would significantly increase the probability of military action against Taiwan."